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The generic status of Roberts' *Prinia* of the south-eastern Afrotropics

by P. A. Clancey

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In the course of dealing with the Afrotropical elements of the *Prinia* coterie of small long-tailed warblers, Hall & Moreau (1970) remark (on p. 175) that "a number of atypical species are currently included in the genus which so broaden the conception of it that it is difficult to name any character on which *Prinia* (*sensu lato*) may be distinguished from *Apalis*. . . Detailed study is called for as a basis for reconsidering the generic limits." Two of the forms singled out as atypical of *Prinia* spp. in general are southern African endemics, namely "*P.*" *substriata* and "*P.*" *robertsi*, distinguishable from current congeners in *Prinia* on the basis of their thin bills and widely differing tail-profiles. One of these atypical species has already been the subject of a detailed study, with the resultant placing of *substriata* in a new monotypic genus, *Phragmacia* (Brooke & Dean 1990; see also Clancey 1991). In the present study consideration is given to the second species concerned, *Prinia robertsi* Benson, 1946.

While initially described and currently treated as a species of *Prinia*, the generic status of Roberts' *Prinia* has for long been subject to doubt. It is a highly localized species, which affects edge situations on the outskirts of montane forest and clumps of bracken-briar at elevations of > 1200 m a.s.l. While occurring in pairs during the breeding season it is gregarious at other times, when feeding birds disposed at ground level in low screening cover will periodically join forces in giving voice to a collective churring chorus, reminiscent of the vocalization of some babblers *Turdoides* spp. Lacking distinctive field characters, it was for long confused with the Tawny-flanked *Prinia* *P. subflava*. Benson (1946a) noted that his new species *P. robertsi* had only 8 rectrices; this was later queried by Chapin (1946), who noted that in two specimens of *robertsi* presented to the American Museum of Natural History, New York, the species seemingly had a complement of 10 rectrices. In a recent note on the

question of the number of tail-feathers in *robertsi*, Irwin (1989) believed that Chapin miscounted the tail-feathers, as some 60 specimens in the collection of the Natural History Museum in Bulawayo and a further 20 in the Durban Natural Science Museum showed incontrovertibly that *robertsi* has a consistent rectricial count of 8 quills only. In the other austral African warblers currently grouped in *Prinia* Horsfield, 1821 (type-species *Prinia familiaris* Horsfield), the rectricial complement is 10 in *P. subflava*, *P. flavicans*, *P. maculosa* and *P. hypoxantha* (see Clancey 1989). In the case of the so-called Rufous-eared Warbler, often relegated to *Prinia* by conservative workers, current opinion inclines to favour adoption of its placement as a sole member of *Malcorus* Smith, 1829, as argued by Maclean (1974), and treatment as *Malcorus pectoralis* Smith on removal from *Prinia*. In *Malcorus*, the rectrices number 12, as opposed to 10 in the new genus *Phragmacia* proposed by Brooke & Dean (1990) for *Drymoica substriata* Smith, 1842, a further southern African endemic warbler confined to the Karoo biome sector of the South West Arid Zone. As far as can be assessed rectricial number is consistent, making due allowance for moult and feather loss through shot damage, in taxonomically relevant complexes of warblers in the Afrotropics. Comparing the situation presented by the low tail-feather complement of 8 in *P. robertsi* with that of all other southern African sylviids (some 60 breeding species), we find that in the more advanced warblers the tail-feather count is 12 and in all others apart from *robertsi* 10.

Roberts' *Prinia* closely resembles *P. substriata* in its tail profile, which is abruptly stepped rather than evenly graduated, the outermost rectrix averaging 38.1 mm, the longest (innermost) 61.4 mm. The other tail-feathers are closer in length to the innermost pair than in typical *Prinia* spp., in this not sharply dissimilar to what is found in *substriata*, in which the equivalent measurements are 42.0 and 69.7 mm (Table 1). The latter also lacks a dark subterminal tail-bar, which is such a feature of typical prinias. The rectrices in *robertsi* are, in addition, appreciably narrower than those of *substriata*.

In the stepped and close grouping of rectrices 2–5 the southern African endemics (*robertsi* and *substriata*) stand apart from other Afrotropical prinia-like species and are probably relicts of early warbler radiations without extant relatives either to the north or south of the Zambezi. As will be appreciated from Table 1, other southern African and relevant extra-limital species have tail profiles which are more or less evenly graduated. The disparity in tail-feather number (8 in *robertsi*, 10 in *substriata*) precludes these two endemics from being viewed as deriving from the same ancestral source, favouring their grouping in separate monotypic genera. Brooke & Dean show that nest architecture and egg colouration in *substriata* differ widely from those of typical *Prinia* spp., whereas in Roberts' *Prinia* the nest and eggs (Benson 1946a, Manson & Manson 1980) are perhaps not sufficiently different from those of many prinias to warrant their usage as criteria of generic relevance. While *robertsi* is not generically separable from typical prinias on what is known of its breeding biology, it is so on the basis of tail form and number of rectrices, whereas the Namaqua Warbler (*substriata*) is separable on both breeding biology and tail profile, but not on number of rectrices.

TABLE 1
 Mensural data (means, mm) of Afrotropical Prinias and some associated long-tailed warblers (males only)

Species	n	Wing	Culmen	Tarsus	R1	Tail R4-6	Difference
8 rectrices							
<i>Oreophilais robertsi</i>	10	50.3	14.8	23.1	38.1	61.4	23.3
10 rectrices							
<i>Prinia subflava</i>	10	50.2	14.0	21.4	28.4	70.6	42.2
<i>Prinia somalica</i>	2	49.5, 50	14.0	19, 20	34, 37	57.5, 61	—
<i>Prinia flavicans</i>	10	54.3	14.1	21.3	39.4	86.6	47.4
<i>Prinia hypoxantha</i>	10	53.8	14.5	23.2	33.6	78.6	45.0
<i>Prinia maculosa</i>	10	52.9	13.8	21.5	37.2	72.7	35.3
<i>Herpystera bairdii</i>	3	54.3	15.8	24.0	15.8	62.7	46.9
<i>Schistolais leucopogon</i>	3	58.0	14.5	25.0	30.6	60.6	30.0
<i>Phragmacia substriata</i>	10	55.5	15.2	20.9	42.0	69.7	27.7
12 rectrices							
<i>Heliolais erythroptera</i>	10	51.7	17.3	22.1	34.7	64.6	29.9

Notes. Relevant African species with tails of 10 rectrices which were not examined are as follows: *Prinia fluxiatilis* Chappuis, 1974; *Prinia molleri* Bocage, 1887; ?*Prinia leontica* Bates, 1930 (treated as a member of the genus *Schistolais* by Wolters (1980)), and *Urolais epichlora* (Reichenow, 1881).

The Rufous-eared Warbler *Malcorus pectoralis* Smith, 1829, which is often viewed as a species of *Prinia*, as by Traylor (1986), has a tail of 12 rectrices and the dorsal surfaces boldly streaked. The nest architecture has also been shown to differ from that of true prinias (use of dead and not green grass blades and stalks) by Maclean (1974).

The reduction between the outermost tail-feather (rectrix 1) and the innermost in (r5) *Phragmacia substriata* and (r4) *Oreophilais robertsi* to below 28 mm reflects the less graduated tail-profile in these two austral African endemics, which are without extant relatives. The two males of *Prinia somalica* available appeared to be in breeding dress, and were not strictly comparable with the other material measured, all of which was in freshly moulted non-breeding condition.

Other points of moment in determining the generic status of *robertsi* are that its voice differs widely from that of prinias (see sonagrams in Maclean 1985), and that it is strongly gregarious when not breeding, moving about in low scrub in sporadically vociferous parties. Also, apart from the moulting in of a minimally shorter tail, it does not assume a marked seasonal mode of dress in response to the onset of nidification. A shortening of the length of the tail in such warblers as prinias and cisticolas is a correlate of the constructing of a compact enclosed nest with a lateral entrance.

While some non-passerines of ancient lineage exhibit a measure of individual variation in the number of tail-feathers, the rectricial complement in the case of passerines is in the main consistent in both genera and species. This is true for the Sylviidae, except in the case of *Apalis pulchra* Sharpe, which has only ten rectrices as against twelve in other *Apalis* forms (see Bannerman 1930) and in other assemblages of advanced warblers of such genera as *Sylvia*, *Parisoma*, *Phylloscopus*, *Cisticola*, etc. From this it is postulated that in long-tailed forms—as in the case of *Prinia*—evolutionary selection has not favoured an increment of the rectricial count from ten to twelve and the parallel adoption of an

apalis-like plumage facies and breeding biology. In the case of *A. pulchra*, plumage and tail-length (wing and tail are about equal in length) are concordant with those of typical *Apalis* spp., the retention of a ten-quilled tail in effect a symplesiomorphy (primitive similarity—with *Prinia* spp.). In warblers such as *Prinia* and *Camaroptera* spp., most of which habitually cock the tail at right angles to the back when excited, the tail-feather number is here interpreted as of particular evolutionary import. The existence of a lone species with an eight-quilled tail, namely Roberts' *Prinia*, furnishes what is in effect an example of evolutionary retardation involving a single variable. This species is unique in the Afrotropics in being the only sylviid with eight rectrices, and, as has been shown here, a shift through the ten-quilled tail facies of *Prinia* spp. and some allied forms to a complement of twelve in the more advanced ones, suggests that a tail of only eight rectrices represents a relict early stage in warbler evolution. The case is in some ways analogous to that of *A. pulchra* mentioned earlier, in which the warbler complexes of *Prinia* and *Apalis* spp. are seen to merge in respect of a single character.

In the circumstances, the relegation of Benson's *P. robertsi* to a new monotypic genus appears to be justified.

Oreophilais gen. nov.

Type species. *Prinia robertsi* Benson, *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 66(1946): 52.

Diagnosis. Differs from *Prinia* spp. (see below) in having a rectricial complement of eight as against ten quills, the tail profile more stepped than graduated, with the outermost feather separated from the tip of the inner (rectrix 4) by *c.* 23 mm. Rectrices 2–4 somewhat clustered apically. Tail-feathers narrow and completely unpatterned. Seasonal dress change associated with breeding minimal. Eye-colour in adult pale yellow.

Status. Monotypic, the single species *Oreophilais robertsi* presumably relict and without known extant relatives; confined to the frontier highlands of eastern Zimbabwe and southern Mozambique at > 1200 m a.s.l.

Etymology. *Oreophil-*, Greek, mountain-loving. The *lais* component of the name, elided with the first part, derives from part of the Greek *hypolais*, which refers to a small warbler-like passerine and has been employed in the formation of several warbler genera. It has also been used as a specific name for the Wailing Cisticola *Cisticola lais* (Finsch & Hartlaub), and figures as a synonym of the Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*.

English name. With the removal of *robertsi* from the genus *Prinia* a change in the vernacular name of the species seems desirable. To meet this need I propose Briar Warbler in allusion to the bracken-briar habitat affected by this montane endemic warbler.

Data assembled during the course of recent research on prinia-like species, which may be found to be helpful in further work on the generic placing of other contentiously classified African sylviids, are given below under the appropriate generic connotation:

Prinia Horsfield, 1821: type-species *Prinia familiaris* Horsfield. Tail of 10 rectrices and steeply graduated, the tail-feathers of variable width,

with light tip and pronounced brownish or blackish sub-terminal spot or complete bar. Seasonal plumage change associated with breeding results in darker upper-parts and a marked reduction in tail-length. Eight Afrotropical species, others in southern Palaearctic and Indomalaya.

Herpystera Sundevall, 1872: type-species *Drymoica bairdii* Cassin. Tail of 10 rectrices and more steeply graduated than in last. Bill basally coarser and broader than in *Prinia* spp., and brownish-black upper-parts and wings, the latter spotted with white, and heavily melanized and banded ventral surface distinctive. Monotypic. Recognized by Wolters (1980) but not by Traylor (1985).

Urolais Alexander, 1903: type-species *Urolais mariae* Alexander. Tail of 10 rectrices, the innermost pair greatly extended beyond the rest, especially in nominate race of *U. epichlora*. Dorsally and over wings yellowish-olivaceous. Monotypic. Recognised by Traylor and treated as a synonym of *Prinia* by Wolters.

Schistolais Wolters, 1980: type-species *Drymoeca leucopogon* Cabanis, 1875. Tail of 10 rectrices, graduated and only marginally (< 6 mm) longer than wing. Rectrices relatively broad and sharply pointed and completely unpatterned. Bill robust. Plumage bluish-grey, with dark cap and distinctive white throat. Monotypic? Wolters (1980) includes *P. leontica* in *Schistolais* in line with a comment by White (1960), whereas Traylor does not recognise the genus and leaves *leontica* in *Prinia*.

Phragmacia Brooke & Dean, 1990: type-species *Drymoica substriata* Smith. Tail of 10 rectrices, the feathers unpatterned and the profile more stepped than graduated, with rectrices 2–5 somewhat apically clustered. Bill relatively long and slender. No seasonal change of dress associated with nidification. Breeding biology separates *Phragmacia* from *Prinia* and allied genera; nest an open cup in riverine herbage or flood debris, and eggs distinctive. Monotypic, with the lone species relict and without extant relatives.

Heliolais Sharpe, 1903: type-species *Dybowskia kemoensis* Oustalet = *Drymoica erythroptera* Jardine. Tail of 12 rectrices, graduated and strongly patterned. Bill more robust than any of the foregoing, slightly decurved and the culmen markedly arched. Chestnut colour of wings distinctive, and assumption of grey dorsal surface in breeding plumage change sets it apart. Monotypic, without close relatives.

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Remarks on the fossil record and suprageneric nomenclature of barbets (Aves: Ramphastidae)

by Storrs L. Olson

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Prum (1988), in expanding on Burton's (1984) observation that the divergence of toucans occurred *within* the family of barbets (Capitonidae), provided a convincing case for including these groups in the same family-level taxon, the name Ramphastidae having priority. In their osteological studies of the Pici, both Prum (1988) and Simpson & Cracraft (1981) emphasized cranial characters at the expense of postcranial ones, which might still be investigated profitably. For example, toucans and barbets share a highly distinctive, presumably derived, morphology of the coracoid that is not found in other members of the Pici. Here, however, I would call attention to errors of interpretation by Prum (1988) in the fossil record and biogeography of barbets, and to errors in nomenclature of subfamilies and tribes that he either introduced or perpetuated.

The taxonomic status of the fossil genus *Capitonides*

Ballmann (1969a) described a new genus and species of barbet, *Capitonides europaeus*, from a carpometacarpus from a mid-Miocene fissure-fill in Bavaria. He referred a tarsometatarsus and humerus from the same site to "*Capitonides* sp.". A carpometacarpus from the Miocene at Grive-Saint-Alban, France, was assigned only to the Capitonidae and was considered to belong to a species more similar to living barbets than was *Capitonides* (Ballmann (1969b)).